

Submission to Inquiry into the impacts of coal mining in the Murray Darling Basin.

To: Senate Standing Committee on Environment, Communications and the Arts.

From: Murray Boshammer.
Total Ag Services,

Background

Total Ag Services is a business that supplies inputs and agronomic advice to farmers all over the Darling Downs and has done since 1995. I am a director and senior agronomist. 2 other partners work in the business and we employ 3 other agronomists and 2 extra office people. I personally have worked as an agronomist in this area since 1990.

Submission

As an Agronomist working all over the fertile plains of the Darling Downs, I see all manner of potential threats to the longevity of Prime farming land and future food production. Since we settled these lands and transformed them into the highly productive soils that they are, we have learnt how fragile they really are. We have come a long way in protecting the soil from wind and water erosion. This has been achieved by working with nature and the seasonal conditions in conjunction with very precise and thorough scientific research. I feel that we need to have a lot more information about the impacts any type of coal mining and Gas extraction on these prime food producing soils because: Mining and crop production are not compatible. The alluvial flood plain cropping land can only be used exclusively for agriculture; if it is mined, the land's productivity will be severely reduced or destroyed.

1. **No one has been able to or will ever be able to rehabilitate prime agricultural soils to a level to match their former production capacity.**
2. The prime Darling Downs self mulching cracking clay soils of the alluvial food plains are very productive because they are very fertile, up to two meters deep and have a high water holding capacity. As an experienced Agronomist I would like to make it clear that these alluvial cropping soils which nature has laid down layer by layer over millions of years, cannot be mined and supposedly rehabilitated without destroying the microbial activity, soil structure, porosity and water holding capacity that make them so very productive.
3. The flood plain soils have subsoil salts which are now not affecting plant growth but if the land was mined, then these subsoil salts would inevitably be mixed with the fertile topsoil and consequently economic crop production would not be possible. Also these salts would be leached into the waterways and then add to the salt load of the Murray-Darling River system. **Coal washing also adds extra salt to the land and the river systems, plenty of evidence of this in Central Queensland.**
4. According to our premier at a community cabinet meeting at “Highfields” Queensland has extensive deposits of coal, up to 300 years supply. Surely if this is the case then mining should not occur on Prime farming land. **We need much better understanding of the long term impacts to the environment.**
5. The Deputy premier recognizes the importance of communities staying together so has asked both mining and agriculture to co exist. 3.5% of Queensland is arable farming land and of this area approximately half of it would be classed as prime agricultural land. We can co exist but only if we still have farming land to produce food off.
6. The current Government needs to act now to ensure that the proper planning is in place for future food production. This planning needs to identify all the prime agricultural land and legislate to protect it. This type of government land use planning occurs with National Parks – no one is able to mine these areas, the same should apply to prime agricultural land. A lot of work identifying these areas has already been conducted by government departments.
7. I like all reasonable people believe that urgent changes to legislation are needed to find a sustainable balance between farming, mining and energy production. Secondary industry people, farmers and even miners are saying it is not right, something has to be done, they know that their food and prosperity has come from our prime farmlands, they also know their children’s livelihoods will come directly or indirectly from the same lands.

8. I acknowledge that coal mining and gas extraction industries, provide financial and employment benefits to the prosperity of our State. We also appreciate that by legislating against the mining of prime food producing land, there will be missed short term financial opportunities, but these short term financial gains from mining will be far outweighed by the long term sustainability of our future food supply and exports for thousands of years.
9. Our core business would suffer a lot if the mining lease of the haystack plain went ahead. This would make it very difficult to continue our present level of employment and community support to continue.

Summary re: impact of coal mining prime agricultural land.

It has been said and agreed on that there is no more suitable land left for food production anywhere in the world. As a matter of fact across the world we are seeing a steady decline in total area available.

Food production must be put as the most important factor for future uses of prime agricultural land, not short term financial gains from mining coal by any method.

We cannot afford to lose any prime agricultural land because – ‘Global Food output must rise by 110 per cent in the coming 40 years’ from the UN Environment Program source: Prof Julian Cribb, “The Coming Famine”

I do not want my children and future generations to be put in the position of going hungry because of short term “Greed” now. We must get this right and make decisions that reflect long term needs of these future generations.